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(6) WAITING: THE DILEMMA OF THE MIA WIFE,

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Family Separation and Reunion

Families of Prisoners of War and Servicemen Missing in Action

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12

Waiting: The Dilemma of the MIA Wife

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Introduction

The emotional adjustment of wives of servicemen missing in action (MIA) during the Southeast Asian conflict has become a topic of considerable concern in recent literature (e.g. Hunter and Plag, 1973). Such sources have emphasized the difficulties these wives have experienced not only because of the prolonged period of husband absence, but also because of the unended grief caused by a situation in which there is no conclusive evidence as to the husband's fate. Hunter and Plag (1973) also found that the wives felt unable to plan realistically for their futures. How could they be sure if their men were dead, alive or ever going to return? Some additional information as to whether there was still a possibility that these men might return, became available with the signing of the Peace Agreement[1] and the return of American prisoners of war. Although, in most cases, the information available was not conclusive, the return of American prisoners of war, the reports by some returnees as to the improbability that servicemen still remained in Southeast Asia, and the activities by the Joint Casualty Resolution Center to account for those servicemen still missing meant that families had to evaluate the available evidence and, thus, arrive at some decision as to whether or not the missing husband would return. This was a critical time for most wives. For some it signaled an inevitable change in official status: a reclassification of the missing husband to "killed-in-action"

1. *Signed in Paris, France on January 27, 1973.*

(KIA) or to "presumptive finding of death" (PFOD), based on the best available information. In either case, a reclassification meant modification in the family's financial status, a restructuring of the wife's social role, and a decisive placement of responsibility upon the MIA wife for the planning of the family's future. For other families the events meant continued waiting and hoping until final word was received.

Studies regarding the adjustment of wives of servicemen still missing in action following "Operation Homecoming" are virtually nonexistent. The one study conducted after the return of American prisoners of war focuses on the children (McCubbin, Hunter & Metres, 1974). Any references to the wives' adjustment have been in relation to the children. In view of the paucity of information and because the period immediately subsequent to the prisoners' release might be a critical time of re-evaluation and readjustment for these women and their families, it was believed important to examine in greater depth the adjustment of these wives whose husbands' fate still remained uncertain.

Problem

Ruth Lindquist (1952) in her study of Air Force families reported the deleterious effects of frequent separation on family life. Findings of that study indicated that family stability was endangered by fear of philandering, assumption of the matriarchal role, and/or reliance on relatives for emotional support and protective functions. In addition, other studies (Dickerson & Arthur, 1965) have emphasized the harmful nature of separation during critical stages of development in both boys and girls – stages that require a father figure in order to proceed satisfactorily. The study of father absence by Baker, Cove, Fagen, Fischer and Janda (1968) emphasized the mother's difficulty in maintaining family controls and consequent child behavior problems. Social introversion and associated feelings of loneliness by the children were common in their particular study group. Their work also indicated that separation had an enduring impact on the lifestyles of the family unit.

Although other military wives adjust to their husbands' absences, there is a vital difference between routine separations among military families and separations in which the husband is declared MIA. Wives whose husbands are declared missing-in-action are placed in a consid-

erably more stressful role. All of the routine problems confronting the military wife who is separated from her husband are further aggravated, in the MIA situation, by the uncertainty about whether or not her husband will ever return, or if he is even alive.

For many of the MIA wives there has been a constant struggle with problems of self-esteem. Forced to make substantial adjustments to the community and its social networks, frequently the MIA wife has had to adjust to a life pattern that is totally different from the one she had previously known. Although Eliot (1946) reports that when a young woman loses her husband, it is easier for her than for the older widow to go on with her life, this does not appear to be the case for the MIA wife whose loss is not yet certain. For this latter group of women, anxieties and depressions have fluctuated month after month, and in many cases year after year, in a cyclical rhythm which has defied resetting into an ongoing pattern of adjustment.

Normal grief can be regarded as a disease specifically caused by object loss, possessing well-defined and specific symptoms, and in uncomplicated cases, running a predictable course towards recovery (Engel, 1961). But complications arise when grief is prolonged or delayed. When grief is held in abeyance and prolonged by no closure, the normal stages are aborted or blocked and the denial stage is protracted and mourning is stalled. In such cases, readjustment to the loss cannot be made, because the loss is not finalized. Even if some forward movement is made, the expectations of others can cause turmoil. How can these women get on with their lives when children, parents and society as a whole expect them to wait?

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to describe some of the findings that grew out of a series of group discussions with wives of servicemen missing in action. Because it has been established that people sharing similar situations are often able to help one another in practical ways by offering emotional support, these discussions were arranged in an attempt to understand what this unique population was experiencing during the period immediately following the return of the American prisoners (RPWs) from Southeast Asia. What had the return of the PWs meant to these women and their children?

Procedure

Discussion groups were an integral part of five, week-long religious retreats sponsored by the High Flight Foundation in the summer of 1973. Although group participation was strictly on a voluntary basis

for the MIA wives, approximately 160 women, representing all branches of the Service, availed themselves of this opportunity. Group meetings were held two times daily for two hours each. Since members from the professional staff of the Center for Prisoner of War Studies acted as group leaders in only three of these retreats, the findings reported in this study are limited strictly to data collected during those retreats.

Findings

Pre-established sub-groups. Two sub-groups of wives had been established prior to the retreats and these groups carried over into the discussion groups held at the retreats. The sub-groups were an outgrowth of previous participation by many of these same women in counseling groups held in two different geographical locations in the United States. This pre-established "group dynamic" proved to be an enhancing stimulus. These wives, as a result of prior interchanges among themselves, appeared more open and willing to deal with very sensitive issues; thus, they legitimated the open discussion of personal matters for the other members. In this way, they also enabled the group discussions to reach quickly a stage of development which under other circumstances may have taken a longer period to attain. These sub-groups brought into focus many sensitive issues never before touched upon by many wives. For example, an open discussion of the prospects of dating and involvement with men other than their husbands was introduced matter-of-factly and discussed by the group. Although such topics might have emerged eventually, the fact that they were brought out in the early stages of the groups' development set a precedent for "safe" discussion of other sensitive subjects, such as concern for children, anxieties about their children's futures, anxieties about their future remarriages and preparation for a possible change of status. Perhaps of greatest importance, it created an atmosphere which permitted the sharing of deeply felt emotions.

Some wives initially attempted to control the group experience by demanding that the group follow a set protocol and focus on very specific topics. One wife, in particular, felt that the group discussion should approximate that of the National League of Families. In other words, she wanted the discussions to focus on political issues. The group leaders, with the support of some group members, however, emphasized the importance of discussion topics of personal concern to all the wives, so that each could benefit from this experience.

Since the groups were held as part of a religious retreat, an atmosphere conducive to the discussion of religious values was provided.

The wives varied in terms of their feelings regarding the importance of religion. Although a few women had found that religion provided a source of strength which enabled them to cope with their position, the majority of the wives focused on the "here and now"; that is, they were concerned with their immediate problems of depression, frustration, etc. and were not dependent on religious interpretations of "why" this was happening to them. Thus, the majority of wives in the groups turned toward either the behavioral scientists for insight or became dependent on the experiences of other wives; they did not look toward religion.

Three Types of Wives. Among the wives, whose average age was 31 years, there appeared to be three "types" participating in the groups. First, there were the "old-timers" epitomized by those women who had played an active role in the National League of Families and had taken it upon themselves to represent the MIA wives' concerns by traveling overseas and by going to Vietnam, Laos, and Paris. These women gave speeches, wrote letters and performed their role as an MIA wife to the maximum of their abilities. They felt a real sense of pride in their activities. These were the women who took leadership roles in the retreat groups. Their years of experience, the waiting, the coping with the hardships attributable to husband absence, and their newly found fund of confidence and independence all contributed to their willingness to discuss issues as candidly and openly as possible. Compared with the other wives, they appeared to have more clear-cut opinions about what they had been through and about whether or not their husbands were going to return. They also seemed to be making some decisions as to their futures. Many had already adapted totally new lifestyles from those which characterized their lives in earlier years.

The second group of women, probably the more typical, was epitomized by the MIA wife in transition. For her, things were just becoming clear. That is, she was beginning to display more confidence in coping with the dual father-mother role and in adjusting to absence of her spouse. Her husband had been gone for at least two years, but she was still in the process of experiencing numerous hardships in struggling with new ways of responding to unexpected difficulties; she was "in limbo". She expressed to the group her frustrations over having to wait for a husband who might not return. She seemed to be more ambivalent about her position than the "old wife". However, at times during the discussions, she emphasized her need to make some commitment as to whether or not her husband would return. This second group seemed to be struggling with the preparation necessary

to establish a new life for themselves independent of their husbands, but as yet, had not embarked upon a new lifestyle.

There was yet a third group that appeared to differ substantially from the two groups already mentioned. This third group of wives could be classified as "the new shootdowns", as they called themselves. Many of them had only recently been classified as MIA wives, their husbands having disappeared within the year prior to the signing of the cease-fire agreement. This group also included MIA wives of long-standing who had fervently committed themselves to waiting and maintaining hope for their husbands' return. For the most part these women were experiencing severe depression and frustration. They could not fully understand, yet respected, the views of those wives who had begun to date, and of those who had committed themselves to the belief that their husbands would not return. These wives sensed that they were different from the others and expressed themselves accordingly. One wife noted, "I don't have anything in common with the rest of you, because I still believe my husband is alive and located somewhere in Laos." Another wife, within the same "new group", was much more emotional in her reactions: "How can you possibly give up on your husbands when there is still hope that some of them may return? I don't see how you can date without feeling guilty or feeling that you've let your husband down."

The "old wives" had already been through the shock period and had recovered somewhat from the bitterness and the anxiety about starting new lives for themselves. In a sense, they had said "goodbye" to their old lives and "hello" to a new life. In this new life they no longer held out serious hope that their husbands were alive and would return. Thus, occasional and serious dating were considered appropriate by that group. The "new wife", on the other hand, was characterized by a strong belief that her husband might still be alive and might return. This belief was usually based upon casualty or intelligence reports, but was also based on religious faith, dreams, or even upon a belief in their husbands' omnipotence. Many of them felt that a suitable period of time during which to gather information concerning his casualty had not yet passed. By and large, these women did not date because they could not seriously accept the possibility that their husbands were dead. Their inability to accept this possibility may have been related to a fear that they might never meet a man as good as they had fantasized their husbands to be.

Operation Homecoming. Many of the wives from both the "old" and the "new" groups were deeply affected by Homecoming and the return of the American prisoners from Southeast Asia. They felt a

sense of happiness for those women fortunate enough to have had their husbands return and, for themselves, felt that this event was a turning point. The fact that the American returnees had reported that it was doubtful that any other prisoners remained in captivity indicated to many of the women in the group that it was finally time to face the reality of their situation. They began to move forward in planning their futures. The wives who were not in accord with this position also seemed to have a legitimate basis for their beliefs. They were, for the most part, wives of servicemen who were shot down over Laos, a country that still refuses to give an accounting of prisoners. These wives believed that they did not have enough conclusive evidence to indicate that their husbands were dead. This viewpoint was accepted by the other group members without disagreement.

Concern for the Children. The group as a whole was unified on one major concern. They were extremely sensitive and perplexed as to the fate of their children. Concomitantly, they questioned whether or not they had been good mothers during their husbands' absences. With a brief introduction by one of the wives on the subject of child adjustment, the women were pleased to have the opportunity to discuss their children's welfare. Even with the differences among the three types of MIA wives mentioned previously, there seemed to be a common bond and a common concern as to whether or not their children would be able to survive and endure. They were not concerned, necessarily, about their own welfare, as much as they were about their children's welfare. The wives felt that they could cope and do well for themselves, but their children's futures were less predictable. To these women the children represented the future, especially in those cases where there was a son who could carry forth the husband's identity, his values, and his aspirations. For others, the children represented their absent husbands. These were *his* children and the only meaningful representatives of *him*. Children also represented a problem. Some mothers expressed concern about specific incidents of truancy or misbehavior on the part of their children. Greater emphasis, however, was placed upon the adolescents and on coping with the problems of this particular stage of development. One woman expressed extreme concern about her daughter who was overreacting to her father's absence and who was eventually treated in a psychiatric setting for an attempted suicide. The woman believed that her daughter's problems were attributable to the loss of her father, and she wondered whether or not the other children would be affected in much the same way. Although the group gave her some encouragement and took note of the fact that her daughter had also

recovered and was doing well in college, they, too, emphasized this concern as to the long-range impact of father absence. They were eager to have the leaders examine the possibility of including their children, as well as themselves, in some longitudinal study. As one wife expressed it, "we may not be able to help our children by this type of research, but I would be willing to participate in it in the hope that we can help other families who may be faced with the same situation". There was unanimous agreement among the participants that such research should be conducted, and all appeared willing to participate.

Discussion of a topic as sensitive to these women as child adjustment also brought forth other reactions. For one woman, her child's adjustment was interwoven with her own future. It was her belief that her youngest son would be the carrier of the family banner. She was adamant about her son's resemblance to his father both in appearance and behavior and, thus, felt the only logical thing to do was have him follow in his father's footsteps. Her description of the home situation and her aspirations for this child were carried one step further. It was her belief that she should reallocate all of her husband's awards and decorations to each of her sons as a step towards drawing closure to the whole issue. Having done so, she would then plan to date and seriously consider remarrying. Finally, she made it clear that under no circumstances would her sons ever be adopted by her future husband. The family name was to be maintained by her sons. The group reacted strongly to this situation. They questioned her motives and whether or not she was really concerned about meeting her own needs or those of her children. When the group questioned her as to her sons' personal desires, she quickly avoided the subject, which was set aside temporarily but later returned to by the group. As discussion proceeded, she became more accepting of comments about her personal situation and actually seemed to be enlightened by the concern of the other wives about her need to idolize her husband and her expectations that her second son be his spitting image.

Another area of discussion related to the children was the concern many wives felt for the children's grandparents on their father's side. Even the wives who had little relationship with the husbands' parents believed that some thought had to be given to the continuity of the relationship between the children and their grandparents. Many wives felt that with time this situation could be worked out, but others were afraid that once they remarried, the grandparents would withdraw from the children. Most of the women expressed a need for help with this concern.

Establishing a New Identity. Socializing appeared to be a very difficult area of adjustment for these women. One of the problems confronting those who wanted to progress from "marking time in place" was that they were handicapped by not finding a proper social outlet or a comfortable new role. Typically, the MIA wife eventually reached the conclusion that, although she held some small shred of hope about her husband, she had to make some attempt to socialize. When she did, however, she often felt like a "fifth wheel". Although she would occasionally attend some "safe" social function with couples she and her husband had known prior to his casualty, she frequently got the message that the other wives were watchful of her behavior, and perhaps, even resented her presence.

Many of the MIA wives indicated they had received much social and emotional support from other prisoner of war and MIA wives. When they were together, it was acceptable to be without a husband and, more importantly, within that group the wives did not have to explain where their husbands were. Often having to explain to outsiders what "MIA" meant was the beginning of the end of an evening out. Thus, MIA groups sometimes formed the basis for meeting other adults of both sexes. One group, for example, joined a mixed bowling league. Other individuals reported joining political groups, returning to college, or commencing or resuming graduate studies as a means of normalizing their social contacts.

Dating for these women often resulted in both guilt feelings and feelings of frustration. Some wives openly discussed what one woman called the "rat race" of dating other men. Their major concerns seemed to fall into two areas. One was a reaction to their personal concerns over becoming emotionally involved. After all these years of postponement, of waiting, and of avoiding the question of whether or not they were able to become fully and emotionally involved with another man, they ironically discovered it was difficult to become involved again. Those who had successful experiences offered much encouragement to the others in the group, based on their experiences. Others described their frustrations with their expectations as to what their future husbands might be and the quality of men that they had dated. They frequently reported finding that none of the men compared with their idealized memories of their husbands. Although they verbalized that this might be unrealistic on their part, they still wanted the men to meet these expectations. Interestingly enough, the wives emphasized how they, in all likelihood, would prefer to marry another career military man. This did not come as a surprise to the other group members and was strongly endorsed and elaborated

upon by all present. As one Army wife said, "I believe that only a military man would understand what I have been through and would be able to comfort me in the manner in which I feel I need to be comforted. He would understand me. The civilian man would not, although he might try to be compassionate and understanding."

Dating, in the absence of conclusive evidence that the husband was dead, invariably appeared to induce some degree of guilt. Even though the wives expressed a firm commitment to the belief that their husband would not return, dating itself and the prospects of becoming involved created a situation that was guilt-provoking. The wives felt uncomfortable about this; they felt dishonest, and were reluctant to become emotionally involved. Serious dating meant coping with the inability to make any permanent contracts of marriage while still in their present status as MIA wives. There was also a great fear, on the part of some of the women, of being exploited by men they were dating; they expressed a desire to harden themselves so as not to become vulnerable again.

Preparation for a Change in Status. Preparing for a change in status was extremely difficult for most wives. Even though verbally expressing their apprehensions concerning a possible change in status, the prospect of the change provoked a great deal of emotion as to their futures. The wives had a difficult time comprehending the full implications of a change in status. The loss of a continuous income, burial ceremonies, and the change in identity from wife to widow were all perplexing issues. One wife, who immediately prior to the retreat had received a change of status, matter-of-factly discussed the pros and cons of this experience. "I thought I had everything all worked out and resolved in my mind. The memorial service brought it all back, and I found it very, very difficult to work through. It was like being notified of my husband's casualty all over again. I cried and thought I would never stop." Another MIA wife, in speaking of the change to KIA wife, said she felt abandoned and betrayed; she still did not believe that her husband was dead, and she had been unable to move forward in her adjustment even after the change in status was accomplished. For many of the others whose husbands had not yet been reclassified, the statements of these two women were responded to by a sense of fear – a fear of having to go through an unanticipated period of re-grief. Many had believed that they would be able to handle with ease the "rituals" made necessary upon actual declaration of death; they had not expected the accompanying emotions.

Another issue that faced the wife in relation to this predicament was her concern over her in-laws' adjustment to a change of status.

She understood and was sympathetic toward their position; for, she knew how very difficult it would be for them to draw closure on their situation. She could start a new life for herself, but for them no such outlet was available.

Conclusion

For many of the wives of men who did not return from Southeast Asia a myriad of problems still exist. Some may yet undergo the problems faced by the wife whose husband was originally classified as killed-in-action. These difficulties, described by psychiatrist Zunin (1969) in his work with groups of KIA wives at Camp Pendleton, California, are the realities that must be faced by the widow – the difficult process of saying "goodbye" to her old life and removing such outward signs of "holding on" as the wedding ring. Others may yet face the residuals of anticipatory grief, the sense of guilt or feeling of shame that Spolyar (1973) describes as frequently occurring if the bereaved person has previously worked out the grief process prior to the actualization of death.

In most cases, however, as time passes the wives appear to be developing the insights which are vital in enabling them to go forward. Most MIA wives in these discussion groups reported feeling they had matured emotionally through their experience of suffering. Their increased independence promoted a belief that they could now do anything that they had to do. Although some of the wives had not yet accepted their loss, they were acutely aware that life must go on.

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The reaction of wives to prolonged absence of a husband still classified as missing in action was investigated. Group discussions with the wives were conducted and feelings about their husbands' absence, their personal and emotional adjustment, and their perceptions of their children's adjustment were examined. Findings indicated that although most of the women had serious concerns for their children's welfare, experienced difficulties establishing their own identities, and were hesitant to admit to themselves the possibility that their husbands may never return, all were acutely aware that life must go on and many had made tremendous strides in adapting to a new lifestyle.

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